

[Seaton Keith]

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Folk [Stuff?] - Range Lore

Range-lore

Nellie B. Cox

San Angelo, Texas.

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RANGE-LORE

Seaton Keith, (Englishmen), came to West Texas in 1881. He was the owner of the Lipan Springs Ranch and his style of living was befitting one "to the manner born". His large house was luxuriously furnished and servants kept it in perfect order. The meals were prepared and served according to the best of English tradition-correct china, silver and napery, the carving of the immense beef roast by Mr. Keith, and the passing of the finger bowls was the every day order. This was embarrassing to many guests, especially if they were old ranchmen who for many years had been served from a chuck wagon and had eaten from a tin plate. Mr. Keith drove a team of the best horses to be had, to a double buggy, on his frequent trips to town. He kept English bird dogs for hunting. Many guests have enjoyed the hospitality and pleasures of the Lipan Springs Ranch during the years when Mr. Keith was owner. He is now 81 years of age. [C 12 - 2/11/41 - Texas?] 2 He sold his ranch and retired from the cattle business about fifteen years ago. He became a naturalized citizen four years after coming to this country but in many ways, appearance, mannerisms, accent and expression, he is typically English.

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Mr. Keith says: "Our family lost their titles in the Stuart Rebellion in 1715. My father finished the study of surgery in the School of Surgeons at Aberdeen. This school has changed names but some three hundred years before my father's entrance to the school, it had been endowed by a Keith of my father's family.

"Do you wish to hear the whole story? Very well, I shall proceed. My father performed the first operation for the removal of ovarian tumor ever to be performed. He became a noted surgeon and we lived in quite good style in London. Father could speak many languages and he wished my brother and me to learn to speak at least the French and German languages so we spent one year in France and one year in Germany. After I came West, I wished devoutly that I had learned to swear in Spanish. But to proceed with the story, later I worked in London but when I was 21, I went to [Burme?]. I did not like it there. The coolest day was 84 degrees and that was in the winter, then my pay was only eighty pounds a year.

"My father having heard of the opportunities in the States, wrote and asked if I shouldn't like the cattle business. I came in a round-a-bout way to West Texas and except for occasional trips to England, I have been here since.

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"I first bought a share in the cattle on the Lipan Springs Ranch, then owned by Jefferson, Miller, and Erskine. When I first came, the only house on the ranch was a picket house. It had been built by DeLong during Indian times. A very funny thing happened the first night I was at the ranch. The picket house had only two rooms below and some kind of sleeping quarters in the attic. Outside was a small rock room where lived William Scherz and his wife. Mrs. Scherz cooked for the ranch and the dining table was in this rock room, along with other furniture. It was so very crowded. We squeezed in to the table by one path and passed out the same way. This night of which I speak, quite a number were there to eat. Uncle Joe Ellis finished his meal and went out first. I went next and as I walked out into the dark, I fell over the wheelbarrow. Oh! I fell all over the place! When I got up, I reached

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down to pick up the wheelbarrow and out of the dark, Uncle Joe grabbed me and said, 'Leave the blasted thing alone. I fell over it, then I saw you fall over it, now let's watch the others fall over it.'

"Our ranch neighbor was the [Becan?] Creek Ranch owned by Frost and Leath. You do not object to a little gossip, do you? Jack Leath kept a [Mexican?] woman and that was not pleasing to all, so he left and went to 4 Mexico, Mrs. Frost was a society lady and did not care for the West. Someone brought a turtle in one day, just a common old hard-shelled turtle, and Mrs. Frost was determined to make turtle soup but the last I heard she had not succeeded in getting the turtle tender. Frost always liked to drink and after he left the ranch someone said that Frost was just as near Heaven as he wished to be, that his home was on a hill in Louisville, Kentucky and surrounding him were distilleries by the dozen.

"My first jury experience was really very funny. Oh! It was great! A big negro was being tried for criminal assault. At night, the jury was fed at the Nimitz hotel and were put in the bridal chamber for the night. Eleven of us men voted to give the negro a penitentiary sentence but one big, fat [boozier?] held out for letting him go with a fine. We were sitting around in the room about eleven o'clock and this fellow said, 'God-damn it,' (you don't mind a few rough words, do you?), 'I'm going home where I can get some sleep. If you fellows have to send this man to the pen, then I'll vote that way.' If I had been the only one of twelve to think differently, I tell you I would have sat there until Doomsday.

"I was the poorest rider in the whole country. A boy named Henry, from Fredericksburg, would break all my horses to ride, but a horse had to be perfectly 5 gentle for me. One time my horse fell with me as I was riding in the pasture and I lay unconscious for six hours in the sleeting weather. No one found me. My pony was standing near when I regained consciousness and I rode back to the ranch.

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"Oh, yes! When I first ranched, I did not boss. I worked as a hand. I listened to the cowboys talk and got their opinion of this man and another. I also learned to observe livestock closely.

"I bought most of my land for \$1.00 an acre. There were five or more sections of land on my ranch owned by people in other states. One section was owned by a Swede, by the name of Nelson who come all the way from Minnesota to sell me his land. I bought it for \$640.00 but he was satisfied. Another fellow came from Kansas. In dress and manner, he reminded me very much of a Scottish Presbyterian Elder. Oh, botheration! I cannot recall his name, but anyhow, he had a stack of deeds to lands in Texas which people had bought or traded for. Some of the deeds were no good and he had failed to even find some of the land. Most of it had been pictured as fine farm land, some with streams flowing through. He did have a deed to a section in my south pasture but it was very rough country.

"Lord Chetwynd who died a few months ago, was a good friend of mine. Chetwynd was the second son of a second son and was greatly surprised when he came into the title. He came here in '83 and was the best land surveyor we ever had in the country. I have seen him dig down to find old stumps where trees had formerly stood to mark corners. Lord Chetwynd possessed a rod which he thought could point out hidden or buried treasure. I do not think he ever found any. I visited him in his home in London in 1913.

"Other Englishmen were Frank, Claude, and Billy Anson. The Head-of-the-River Ranch which they bought is still owned by Billy's daughter. Claude told me that when he got to Abilene on his way out here, a man said to him, 'Let's open a bank here.' Anson, having been accustomed to the banks of England with soads of money did not think he had anything with which to start a bank. 'Why,' the man said, 'we can take in deposits and when we think we have enough, we'll split and go our way.'

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"I have had droughts on the ranch. One spring when I had had no rain for a year and half I killed the calves as they came, but Mr. Wallace didn't send me a check for them. They were a total loss.

"It is outrageous the way people will overstock their pastures. It is said of one man, that if he goes out in his pasture and finds three blades of grass growing, that he becomes very much excited and says, 'Oh, my God! I must get some more stock. Just look at the grass.'

"Will Carver used to work on my ranch. He was a good, quiet, steady boy, but his wife and baby died and he seemed to go all to pieces. He joined Black Jack's gang of desperadoes and was shot in Sonora.

"I know a good story of Tom Ketchum. Our boys were working at a round-up on the San Saba River. My wagon was there and among the boys was a short, stocky fellow named Springstun. We called him 'Dogie'. He had been quite a wrestler. One evening as the boys were sitting around waiting for supper, Tom Ketchum, a tall, rawboned fellow, came by and said, 'Dogie, I think I'll just take you down and duck you in the river.' With that, he took Dogie by the back of the collar and began dragging him to the river. Dogie bided his time. When a convenient time came, Dogie grabbed Tom by the legs and threw him over. Tom lay there, limp and gasping. Someone said, 'Dogie, you have killed Tom.' 'No, I reckon not,' replied Dogie, nonchalantly. The next day Tom was able to laugh with the others at himself. Poor fellow! He got off to the bad and was hanged.

"Sometimes I wonder if a different life would not have been better. Now, I have no wife, no children, but possibly they would not have enjoyed my mode of living and my friends, in the way I have. Oh, really, my life has been very pleasant." Range-Lore

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

Seaton Keith, San Angelo, Texas, interviewed, February 8, 1938.